

# *The Silent Exodus: The Decline of the Yiddish Language in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*

Manchang Luo<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Georgetown Preparatory School, Georgetown, United States

a. pluo@gprep.org

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Despite the hundreds of organizations and museums dedicated to documenting the atrocity of the Holocaust and the sufferings of the Jewish People, very few documents and museums touch upon the impact the Holocaust has brought upon the language of Yiddish. Very little is known today about the distribution of Yiddish speakers throughout the world. Additionally, very little research has been made about the aspects in the aftermath of the Holocaust that has smothered the language. This study focuses on those aspects that have rendered the Yiddish language almost extinct and attempts to reveal the complexity and variety of negative impacts that the Holocaust has had. I found that a combination of antisemitic legislature, religious movements, and mass migrations led to the ultimate downfall of Yiddish.

**Keywords:** Silent Exodus, Yiddish Language, Holocaust

## 1. Introduction

One of, if not the most notorious atrocity ever committed against a group of people, a deep scar in the body of human history, is The Holocaust. Beyond the bloodshed, gas chambers, and concentration camps however, this Cataclysmic event has also left an eternal mark on the delicate cultural and linguistic fabric of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, often blinded by the visible destruction brought about by the Holocaust, researchers miss the tragedy brought upon the Yiddish language, and the many factors that led to its decline.

The Germanic language with traces of Hebrew and Slavic language of Yiddish has played an essential role in Jewish life for centuries, with old documentations of Jewish lore and religious scriptures all being in Yiddish. With over 85 percent of the approximately 6 million Jewish people murdered being Yiddish speakers, the Holocaust had essentially torn a hole through the Yiddish-speaking communities of Europe. For a while, both the spoken language and the Jewish Heritage was completely lost.

This paper sheds light on the numerous complex factors that contributed to the decline of Yiddish in the aftermath of the Holocaust. I will put this precipitous decline in the historical and cultural context in which it occurred, and examine the ripples left by the Holocaust that are still existent today, focusing on the linguistic and cultural aspect of this phenomenon. The decline of Yiddish is cold hard evidence of the devastating impact brought about by the Holocaust, but at the same time, a testament to the resilience of thousands upon millions of Jewish people worldwide. Through this paper, I hope

to speak the chapter of history that is often trapped in the shadow of the visible effects of the Holocaust, and help more people gain a deeper understanding to the magnitude of this tragedy.

## **2. Historical Context**

The Yiddish language was already declining due to urbanization and secularization, but the Holocaust not only accelerated these trends but also dealt a severe blow to the language. The mass displacement of Jews all over Europe massively impacted the Yiddish language as a huge percent of the population was killed while others fled from the continent dispersing into distant lands. According to Pasikowska-Schnass, the mass migration of people negatively affected the Yiddish language because as families and communities were torn apart, it disrupted the natural intergenerational transmission of Yiddish [1]. Elders in the community are responsible for passing the knowledge through oral traditions and familial communication to the younger generation, which meant their death spelled doom for the Yiddish language. Children copy their parents, which means if there are no speakers to transmit the language in families, they assimilate into different cultural and linguistic contexts. Further, Jews who survived the persecution were forced to adapt to new languages and cultures to avoid further persecution. According to Shandler, the persecution of Jews by the Nazis had a ripple effect as other groups began doing the same, making life difficult, and adaptation was the better option [2]. However, the adaptation had negative effects as it not only led to a decline in the number of Yiddish speakers but also weathered down the communal bonds that had preserved the language for generations.

When the Jewish populations were uprooted from their homes and their property looted by the Nazis, they lost everything, most importantly Yiddish literature and documents, which made the language inaccessible. According to Rose, the Holocaust not only caused the deaths of Yiddish speakers but also contributed to the loss and destruction of Yiddish literature and cultural artifacts that are critical in transmitting the language across groups [3]. For example, the Yiddish population would have newspapers that address issues affecting the Jewish community and the wider society, but the Holocaust meant they lost the infrastructure that produced them, and they were unable to distribute them to all populations. Also, countless Yiddish books, manuscripts, and documents were lost during the Holocaust. According to British Library, these texts could have been destroyed by the Nazis that took over Jewish property or destroyed during the chaos that permeated the wartime period [4]. As a result, it meant that survivors had no way of teaching others or learning about their language since they lacked the necessary materials. The death of many Yiddish speakers also meant that there was nobody to safeguard the materials. The result was the loss of Yiddish literature and historical records that were critical in passing the language to younger generations. The loss led to the erasure of the language as if it never existed.

## **3. Migration and Assimilation**

Millions of Jews migrated from Europe during and after the Holocaust, many settling in the US and Israel. According to Kurz, the migrations were a welcome respite from the horrors of Europe, but it meant the decline of Yiddish [5]. The best example is the creation of Israel by the Zionist movement, which wanted to create a predominantly Jewish homeland but favored Hebrew as the national language. The country's linguistic preference meant the Yiddish language lacked the resources and focus to be transmitted to the younger generation. For example, the choice of Hebrew in the country meant that libraries would dedicate less space for Yiddish texts, making it hard for the people to learn and diminishing its prominence in the Jewish community. There would be no point in learning a language if you are not going to use it, and within no time, it is forgotten. Further, the migration into these countries without the needed texts and older adults who speak the language worsened the issue.

Individuals might have been interested in learning the language, but most texts had been lost in Europe, and elders who would have taught the younger generation had died.

When Jews left Europe, they settled in different nations where they were forced to assimilate into their linguistic and cultural surroundings. According to Levitt, assimilation was inevitable because they had to engage in economic activity with the local population and rebuild their shattered lives [6]. Thus, many Jews adopted the host nations' traditions, cultures, and languages, abandoning the Yiddish language. The decision to assimilate was also influenced by the trauma they experienced, as many wanted to distance themselves from the past. They did not want to be targeted in a foreign land, and adopting their language was the best way to blend in well. Additionally, when Jews moved to new countries, they would find themselves in small groups. There were only pockets of Jews in these nations, making it hard to use the language to communicate. The language which once dominated the Jewish communities in Europe was only used by the older generation.

#### **4. The Role of the Zionist Movement in Yiddish Decline**

The persecution of Jews was primarily driven by the lack of a homeland and the Zionist movement embarked on a mission to ensure there was a home. They achieved this goal through the creation of Israel but it came at a cost for the Yiddish language as they would neglect it in favor of Hebrew. The movement chose Hebrew as the language of choice since they regarded it as instrumental in their revivalist endeavors. According to Freeburg and Bower, they saw language as the key to creating a unified national identity, and it was actively promoted in governance, education, and culture [7]. As a result, the Yiddish language was marginalized, and without institutional resources and support, it sank into the abase. For example, the government allocated resources for cultural preservation and literary endeavors, but with the Yiddish being starved of these resources, its decline was inevitable. It did not have a chance to compete with the mainstream Hebrew language. Also, the fact that it was not widely used meant most people lost interest. Teachers who could have dedicated their time to teaching the language could not since they could not get the needed resources and support from the population.

Israel is regarded as the home of the Jewish people, meaning their actions are often copied or replicated by Jewish communities worldwide. According to Nove, when Israel declared Hebrew as the national language, institutions in regions like Europe diverted funds that could have supported Yiddish literary endeavors, education, and cultural preservation to promote and conserve the Hebrew language [8]. The redirection of attention and resources eroded the Yiddish cultural infrastructure and hindered any chance for revitalization. The change was most evident in Europe as schools, theaters, and publishing institutions shifted their focus to Hebrew, giving Yiddish a cold shoulder and no chance for revitalization. The choice signified that Yiddish was less significant than Hebrew, and the discourse only hastened the decline of the language. Further, the dispersion of populations into different nations meant that these groups could rebuild the language in their communities without support, but since the resources had been diverted elsewhere, there was no chance for its revitalization. The Zionist movement should have been the medium to bring the language back to life, but it destroyed it.

#### **5. Yiddish Suppression in Soviet-Controlled Territories**

The end of WW2 saw the Soviet Union Controlling vast territories in Europe, and their desire to spread the Russian language stifled Yiddish. The goal of the Soviet authorities was to assimilate small cultures into the dominant Russian language to create a homogenous identity. The Yiddish culture was one of the minorities wiped out as the Soviets tightly controlled or shuttered cultural institutions, publications, and language schools. The stringent measures made it hard for the Jews to transmit the

Yiddish language. For example, the censorship of Yiddish literature under the pretext it was politically aberrant or in opposition to the Soviet ideology made it hard to access and distribute texts to Jews in these nations. Yiddish would only be used behind closed doors, which meant it was not used for everyday communication, thus affecting the young generation who did not have a chance to practice it. According to Kunitz, Jews, as a result, would use Russian as their primary language while Yiddish was secondary, which means the normal transmission of language from the old to the young was disrupted [9]. The lack of cultural diversity meant chances of the Yiddish language revitalizing in these regions were impossible.

The Soviets' desire to eliminate the minority cultures, especially the Yiddish language, was not entirely successful as it bore fruit in hybrid culture, but it was a threat to the mainstream Yiddish language. According to Lipphardt, the suppression by the Soviets bore fruit in a new phenomenon as young people developed a Soviet-Jewish hybrid [10]. They would fuse elements of their culture to the Russian identity. The fusion resulted in a hybrid culture made of Russian and Yiddish languages, producing a new form of expression. The phenomenon might have preserved aspects of the Jewish culture, but it meant a diversion from the Yiddish language as the primary form of cultural expression. The mutation had taken place, and it would be impossible to reverse the results, which means Yiddish was dead as a leading language in Europe. Also, school kids would place Russian as their primary language while relegating Yiddish to a secondary role, which diminished its influence. The Soviet's actions influenced the language's decline and changes that could never be reversed.

## 6. Lingual Disconnect in European Nations

Poland was one of the nations that fell under German control on its ravaging attacks on the continent and established its death camps there. Though Christian Poles are lauded for their gallant service as they risked their lives to save the Jews, many people collaborated and enabled the Nazis in their extermination efforts. According to Kijek, the behavior of the Polish population at this period represented antisemitic beliefs inherent in society before and during the Holocaust [11]. Thus, when the approximately 2700 Jews fled to Poland, they were in a hostile environment. The antisemitism they witnessed in the country permeated all aspects of life, starting from economic opportunities to social interactions. For example, when they needed to buy supplies, locals would refuse to sell to them. Everyday inconveniences made it hard to secure basic necessities and create a sense of security. As a result, it meant they could not practice the Yiddish language openly for fear of persecution by the local population. The language was only used in the shadows, which meant it could never gain prominence over the local religion.

The discrimination witnessed on the streets was worsened by the laws passed to restrict the movement of Jews or their engagement in economic activities. The Nuremberg Race laws implemented by the Nazis are a great example as they restricted the movement and social benefits of the Jewish population. For example, restricting the movement of Jews within European nations meant that Yiddish speakers had no way of connecting with their communities, an opportunity they could have used to access educational content and maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage. Also, Jews were denied access to social benefits like employment, healthcare, and education. The isolation meant there was no way of transmitting the language as people could not meet or were forced to abandon the language to survive in the racist environment [12]. Further, Poland passing laws meant to exclude Jews was crucial in cutting the connection between Yiddish speakers and their culture and language. The law placed employment barriers, which meant Jews had to seek work in the informal sector. Their economic hardships made it hard to build a cohesive society, thereby hindering the transmission of the Yiddish language to future generations. Also, the inability to participate in mainstream society led to the erosion of their culture. The linguistic and cultural heritage of the Yiddish was in peril, and it made it impossible to continue practicing the language.

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the decline of the Yiddish language after the Holocaust was driven by a complex web of factors starting from the forced migration, killing of older adults who speak the language, disrupting intergenerational transmission, loss of Yiddish literature, forced assimilation and suppression of Jewish cultures in different regions. The suppression of the Yiddish language happened in many nations, such as Russian-controlled territories, and the preference for Hebrew over Yiddish by the Zionist movement. The prioritization of Hebrew and Russian languages in these regions hampered Yiddish-speaking communities. Additionally, they faced antisemitic discourses in countries like Poland, making transmitting the language hard. Jews faced hostilities wherever they went, forcing them to adapt and abandon their cultures. Lastly, moving to foreign countries meant they had to assimilate, and the loss of Yiddish literature, which could have helped revive the language, meant there was no way of passing the knowledge to younger generations. The loss of literature texts and lack of resources, as the main focus was on Hebrew, meant the Yiddish language had no chance of gaining its lost prominence. The decline of the language showcases the larger effects of the Holocaust beyond the physical killings, which caught people's attention, but all the while, the Jewish population has been resilient in the face of extermination.

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